

Remarks at the White House Bicentennial Dinner

November 9, 2000

Good evening, Mrs. Johnson, President and Mrs. Ford, President and Mrs. Carter, President and Mrs. Bush, distinguished guests. It has been said that an invitation to the White House to dinner is one of the highest compliments a President can bestow on anyone. Tonight Hillary and I would amend that to say that an even higher compliment has been bestowed on us by your distinguished presence this evening. In the entire 200 years of the White House's history, never before have this many former Presidents and First Ladies gathered in this great room.

Hillary and I are grateful beyond words to have served as temporary stewards of the people's house these last 8 years, an honor exceeded only by the privilege of service that comes with the key to the front door.

In the short span of 200 years, those whom the wings of history have brought to this place have shaped not only their own times but have also left behind a living legacy for our own. In ways both large and small, each and every one of you has cast your light upon this house and left it and our country brighter for it. For that, Hillary and I and all Americans owe you a great debt of gratitude.

I salute you and all those yet to grace these halls with the words of the very first occupant of the White House, John Adams, who said, "I pray to heaven to bestow the best of blessings on this house and all that shall hereafter inhabit it. May none but the honest and wise rule under this roof."

Ladies and gentlemen, I ask you to join me in a toast to Mrs. Johnson, President and Mrs. Ford, President and Mrs. Carter, President and Mrs. Bush for their honest and wise service to the people while they inhabited this house.

NOTE: The President spoke at 8:20 p.m. in the East Room at the White House. The dinner was hosted by the White House Historical Association. This item was not received in time for publication in the appropriate issue.

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Well, Mr. Sidey, we just saw the first example of your comment about doing without Air Force One. President Bush is having airplane trouble and will stay with us for the remainder of the evening. [Laughter] Actually, I've commiserated with all these people about what our new life is about to be like. And I understand that the worst part of it is that I will be lost for the first 4 months because no one will be playing a song anymore. [Laughter]

I want to thank Lady Bird Johnson and President and Mrs. Ford, President and Mrs. Carter, and President and Mrs. Bush, for being here.

I thought that joke about Harry Truman living with his mother-in-law was particularly apt, since my mother-in-law is upstairs at this very moment. And she has agreed to let me live with her for the next 2 years, when I'm in Arkansas trying to build my library.

I, like previous speakers, would like to acknowledge President and Mrs. Reagan and say that we miss them and wish them well. I'd also like to acknowledge a person who's been a particular friend of Hillary's and mine these last 8 years, who suffered two losses in her family recently and could not be here tonight, with whom we care very much about, Margaret Truman Daniel. And we're thinking of her and wish her well.

I would like to thank Senator and Mrs. Robb for being here and for their service to America. And I'd like to thank you, General Eisenhower. Thank you for coming. We're honored to have you here. And Ethel Kennedy, thank you for coming; and other members of Presidents' families.

One of the most interesting things, to me, about living here these last 8 years is watching the threads of American history weave their way through the families of Presidents. The other day we had an actual ceremony here commemorating the 200th anniversary of the opening of the White House. And someone played John Adams and came up with his one footman and the horses and the old 18th-century carriage and got out. And then we had a little reception for all the

Adams family members in the direct line of John and John Quincy Adams who were here.

And it turned out that one of them had two sons in the United States Navy today, one of whom serves on a destroyer that is the twin to the U.S.S. *Cole* and was there when Hillary and I spoke with the families and at the memorial service a few days ago. It made me, once again, very grateful to be an American, as well as to have the opportunity to live here.

I thank the members of the White House Historical Association, and especially Bob Breeden and Hugh Sidey. Hugh, I hope you won't mind—you've had fun at our expense—I was thinking, there are at least two of us up here at the table that you've said more nice things about tonight than you have in our entire career in public life. *[Laughter]* And we are immensely grateful. I was also thinking that between all of us, we've served so long, we've been here together about half as long as Helen Thomas has. And we're delighted to see you. *[Laughter]*

I want to thank the members of the Marine Band. You know, I was a band boy in high school, which, if you were from Arkansas and over 6 feet tall, was a bad thing to be. *[Laughter]* But I loved music from the time I was a child. And I think it would be fair to say that I doubt if any President has ever enjoyed the Marine Band as much as I have. I have loved every encounter I've ever had with them, and they are absolutely magnificent.

I know that all of you noticed that every President who has spoken here tonight thanked Gary Walters and the White House staff. They were not going through the motions. They were not saying that because that was something they had to say. Until you've lived here and you realize how totally bizarre your life can get from time to time, it's impossible to express how grateful you are to people who make it normal, no matter what; who are always there for you at all hours of the day or night. When you're up in the polls and down in the polls, when you're celebrating your greatest triumph or the wheel runs off, they still try to make it a home. And then, when you have to get out and make it a public place, simultaneously, they do that as well.

So Gary, from you to all the people that are down in the basement tonight keeping the lights on, making sure that the temperature works, all the people that you never to see, to all these wonderful people who served our dinner tonight, we thank you from the bottom of our hearts. Thank you.

History tells us that even as the city's planners debated the final design of this house, masons laid its stone foundations 4 feet thick. Like our Nation's Founders, these men were building a monument to freedom that they wanted to last. Over the course of two centuries, as all of you know—and we've seen some references tonight—this old house has withstood war and fire and bulldozers, just as its inhabitants have faced a stern test or two.

In this remarkable audience are former residents, historians, and others who have very little to learn about the White House. But I thought I would use, if I might, the story of the East Room, where we are now tonight, as just a metaphor. You've already heard that Dolly Madison cut down George Washington's picture here, and you may remember that it was said that the East Room began its existence as Abigail Adams' laundry room. But it was soon after that Thomas Jefferson, with Merriwether Lewis, unrolled maps on the floor amidst animal skins to plan what became known as the Lewis and Clark expedition, on this very floor. Whether you agree with all of Thomas Jefferson's policies or not, it's interesting; just in buying Louisiana and doing the Lewis and Clark expedition, he helped to make us the great continental nation that we are today.

Now, a few years after that, President Lincoln introduced Ulysses Grant to well-wishers. You may remember that a lot of people in Washington didn't like General Grant. He was 5'4", unimposing. He forgot to shave on some days when he was more interested in battle, and he was said to enjoy drink from time to time. And when some of the people in Washington were criticizing this rube from the hinterland because of his drinking habits, President Lincoln wryly suggested that he wished the person would find out what General Grant drank and give it to the other generals; it might end the war more quickly. *[Laughter]*

In fact, that was one of many things that were untrue. There's not a single documented reference of Ulysses Grant ever being drunk on the job. I thought I would use this historic moment to clean his slate a little bit. [*Laughter*]

But anyway, Grant was a little guy, and they were mobbing him here in this room, so he did something that I'm not sure I would have the courage to do. He jumped up on the sofa and stood there so that he would not be completely overrun by the crowd.

It was here, more tragically, that just a couple of years later, Abraham Lincoln lay in state; and here, quite fittingly, a century after that, President Lyndon Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act, one of the most important American acts of the last 50 years. Just 25 years ago, Gerald Ford took the oath of office and was sworn in as President here.

We have had so many happy nights here, but I think I'll just mention one because she is here in this room. Not so very long ago, we celebrated the 50th anniversary of the North Atlantic Treaty Association, the embodiment of our commitment in the cold war to stand against communism. And on that occasion, we had this marvelous dinner with this sort of arched head table with all the heads of state, the largest number of heads of state ever to visit Washington at one time. They were entertained here by Jessye Norman, standing and singing alone. And we welcome you here tonight, again. Thank you very much.

This place is a thrill to live in. You heard President Carter say that he told them he wanted to eat the things that the staff was eating, as it turned out. When I came here, we asked them to re-do the kitchen so we could have dinner in the kitchen at night. And just about every night for 8 years, Hillary and Chelsea and I have had dinner in the little kitchen upstairs—which is interesting how low standards have sunk. Until Jackie and John Kennedy moved here, the First Family came downstairs to dinner every night in a formal dining room for 160 years. Who knows? Maybe the next crowd will be eating on the roof. [*Laughter*]

We have enjoyed being in the Solarium, where President Reagan convalesced after he was shot. We have family and friends there.

And I spend a lot of my evenings alone working in the Treaty Room, as you just heard from Hugh Sidey, on the great walnut table that President Grant used for a Cabinet table. Shortly thereafter, it was used in that same room, which was Abraham Lincoln's waiting room, as the table on which the treaty ending the Spanish-American War was signed in 1898. Thereafter, it became known as the Treaty Table, and every single treaty signed in the United States in 102 years has been signed on that table: President Carter's Camp David accords; the treaty signed by Yitzhak Rabin and King Hussein of Jordan, ending the war between their two nations. It always reminds me that I am a temporary resident.

Hillary and Chelsea and I will be forever grateful to the American people for letting us make the White House our home for what was, I find amazing now, 40 percent of my daughter's young life. From the day we moved in, Hillary devoted herself to preserving the White House, to the restoration of public rooms, to the selection of the bicentennial china we use tonight, to installing sculpture in the Jacqueline Kennedy Garden. I thank her for the work she has done to make this a more vibrant living museum than ever.

I thank Mrs. Carter and Mrs. Bush for the work they did, which Hillary was able to help complete, to adequately endow the White House Endowment Fund so that this house and its collections will be better preserved for all future visitors, and so that all people who come here will better understand our Nation's past.

Now soon, we, too, will be part of that past. When I leave here, as we all must, I will depart with a great sense of gratitude. I'm being helped along the way by all of my friends who are determined to keep me humble and grounded.

The other day, I went to a meeting of the bishops of the Church of God in Christ, and I thought I was being quite clever. I got up in front of these 400 bishops, and I said, "I wanted to come here today because I wanted to be among some leaders who aren't term-limited." And the head bishop got up and said, "Oh, Mr. President, we're all term-limited." [*Laughter*]

And so I say tonight, the White House has never belonged to any one of us. It will always belong to all of us. We do not yet know who the next occupant will be, but we can honor the service, the lives, and the families of the candidates who contested this election. We know how proud President and Mrs. Bush must be of their son, and rightly so. And we Americans should take great pride in the fact that this contest was fought to a close conclusion. It is not a symbol of the division of our Nation with the vitality of our debate, and it will be resolved in a way consistent with the vitality of our enduring Constitution and laws.

I think tonight of the words of an Englishman, Charles Dickens, who visited here in 1842. Listen to what he said right after he attended one of the functions that they then called levees. Where I come from, that holds in the Mississippi River. [Laughter] But for years in the 19th century, the receptions that Presidents regularly held were called levees. He walked through the White House, listening to the Marine Band play, marveling at the crowd assembled. And here is how he described the event in his American notes: "Every man, even among the miscellaneous crowd in the halls who were admitted without any orders or tickets to look on, appeared to feel that he was part of the institution." Well, that's still the way it ought to be.

Every one of you, from the wealthiest to those who could not be called wealthy, of whatever race or region, whatever your background, whether you're dining here or working here, you are a part of the institution. You are the center of the Nation. The most important title in this house has ever been "citizen." It is, after all, why we're still around here after 200 years.

Thank you, and God bless you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 10:18 p.m. in the East Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Margaret Truman Daniel, daughter of President Harry S. Truman; former First Ladies Betty Ford, Rosalynn Carter, Barbara Bush, and Nancy Reagan; Lynda Robb, daughter of President Lyndon B. Johnson and Lady Bird Johnson; Gen. John Eisenhower, USA (Ret.), son of President Dwight D. Eisenhower; Ethel Kennedy, widow of Senator Robert F. Kennedy; Helen Thomas, former reporter, United Press Inter-

national; soprano Jessye Norman; Robert L. Breeden, chairman and chief executive officer, White House Historical Association; Gary Walters, chief White House usher; and Republican Presidential candidate Gov. George W. Bush. The transcript released by the Office of the Press Secretary also included the remarks of President Gerald R. Ford, President Jimmy Carter, President George Bush, and Hugh Sidey, president, White House Historical Association. The dinner was hosted by the White House Historical Association. A tape was not available for verification of the content of these remarks. This item was not received in time for publication in the appropriate issue.

Letter to Congressional Leaders on the Application of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia To Join the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe

November 9, 2000

Dear _____:

The Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY) has indicated its preparedness to join the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) as a participating state. Given the interest of the Congress in the question of FRY participation in international and regional organizations, as reflected, for example, in section 594(e) of the Foreign Operations, Export Financing, and Related Programs Appropriations Act, 2001, I want to inform you that the United States representative to the OSCE will support the FRY's application when the matter is considered before the OSCE Permanent Council on Friday, November 10. The decision is predicated on the FRY's recent actions, including those that indicate the FRY is approaching membership in regional and international organizations on the same basis as the other successor states, and is taking important steps towards resolving issues related to liabilities, assets, and property.

We have reviewed the FRY application and have concluded that the FRY has applied on the same basis that Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Slovenia, and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia applied to participate in the OSCE following